

The Need today to Standardise the Presentation and Interpretation of Theravāda Buddhist Teachings in terms of the ancient accepted Authentic Pali Texts

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This is indeed going to be raising a hornets' nest. The hornets are numerous and they can definitely be ferocious. At the same time, the issues involved do need immediate attention without any further delay. Among many, the following areas come within our purview.

1. The so-called authentic Pali texts printed early in Sri Lanka have, within the more recent decades of the last century, witnessed inexplicable changes where readings of the earlier texts have been altered without giving any justifiable reasons for the changes. The first rot in this area started with the printing of new editions of the old texts, at times by powerful groups and at others even by less powerful ones. This has happened at both national and international levels.
2. In the next category, we have witnessed over the decades, errors of translation into Sinhala of Pali words and even whole sentences, resulting in total distortion and perversion of meaning. In particular, the Sinhala translations of the Dhammapada in Sri Lanka, often misdirected by deflected Commentarial traditions, reveal many such glaring errors. To say the least, they make the dhamma topsy-turvy. Has anybody ever sensed these or said a word about them. Far from it. Some among the believed to be very learned in the country even swear vengeance upon those who point out such errors in Sri Lankan translations.
3. In the third category, it must be said that the entry of the digital media into this area of Buddhist literary texts by way of computerising the extant printed

material has, in many instances, led to seriously disastrous results. In the hands of typists who work for these large scale organizations, whose knowledge of Pali and equally importantly the knowledge of the dhamma is seen to be minimal or totally nil, we have discovered some of the newly released CD Roms of such origin to be devastatingly ruinous. In some of these early Sri Lankan Pali texts, known to us for more than fifty sixty years, readings have recently been changed to other less acceptable ones without any rhyme or reason. This to us is no less than internationally aggressive competition at world trade centres. The results are much worse than where national histories are now being re-written, prompted by ethno-religious arrogance.

4. The digital media [which includes websites, servers and numerous internet programs] which is now within the reach of everyone in the town, has also opened the flood gates for a ceaseless inflow of garbled versions into the hands of credulous seekers of information on Buddhism who often are not necessarily serious students of the subject. In their hands, we have often discovered, these turn out to be weapons of offence and destruction than otherwise. They are seen quoted and requoted, often in unseemly manner, for very derogatory purposes. On the other hand, on a global reckoning, the more serious students of Buddhism of a much younger generation, younger both in years and in their maturity, are thrown into utter confusion and bewilderment as to the intent and import of basic Buddhist teachings. The outcome of this which we believe to be a near death-dealing virus [not very different from that of the recent SARS epidemic] would be the total disappearance of what could unmistakably be identified as the early Buddhist teachings of the Buddha Gotama.
5. Besides these what we would call written down and documented areas where errors could be checked and publicly discussed and debated upon, there is also a new rapaciously disastrous area of the uttered word on Buddhism. As

far as we can reckon, these range over three or four segments like the public media of the radio and the television as well as collectively disseminated and individually delivered neo-scientific and super-modernistic presentations of the teachings of our pre-Gallilean ancient Buddha of ancient India of two and a half millennia ago. All these areas, it is no secret to any one, are manned and dominated by both monks and laymen of formidable stature.

6. The field of worldwide distortion of Buddhism, unwittingly though at times, is vast. In Sri Lanka today, it is much more inflammably widespread. Teachers and preachers of the dhamma, each claims a correctness to what he says. Abhidhamma at times claims to be the ultimate authority on the dhamma. Can we afford to forget the Buddha's own instructions in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta under the heading *cattāro mahāpadesā* which specifically deal with the criteria with which to decide on the authenticity and acceptability of Buddhist teachings?
7. In our early Buddhist literary records like the Aṭṭhakathās of Sri Lanka we have reports of the early Sīhala sangha enjoying that academic dignity of freely examining the content of the dhamma as expected of them by the Buddha and critically evaluating the opinions expressed about them by various authorities. A very good example of this is the story of the dialogue between Dīpavāsī Sumana Thera and his pupil Tipiṭaka Cūlābhaya Thera regarding the use of the term *Catupārisuddhisīla*. This report comes to us in the writings of the Commentator Buddhaghosa. It is enlightening to note the manner in which the teacher accepted with dignity and decorum the correction by his pupil. [See Encyclopaedia of Buddhism - Sri Lanka, Vol. IV. Art. Catupārisuddhisīla].
8. Finally we come to areas of interpretation of Buddhist texts. We discover that new visions of the dhamma are imposed on listeners and readers by some neo-fundamentalist preachers who present very down to earth teachings of Buddhist suttas as transcendental teachings which they name as *paramattha-*

desanā. We have seen the Mangala Sutta presented in this manner. We believe you have seen it too. Does this not totally destroy the social relevance of Buddhism as a religion?

9. We believe that socio-ethical upgrading of the humans via *sīla* is the fundamental first step in the religious culture of Buddhism, whatever the self-appointed men and women of the neo-fundamentalist Buddhist groups of today dare say. *Mātā-pitu-upatthānaṃ* of the Mangala Sutta, we do believe, does reflect this sensitivity of the Buddha to develop to its highest level the cultural potentialities of the human before endeavouring to push him to the acquisition of superhuman achievements. *Mātā-pitu-upatthānaṃ* of that sutta to us therefore is no more than a true upgrading of human character development, providing an infallible foundation for the attainment of the highest bliss of Nibbāna.

10. As we wind up this brief introduction to our subject, it is with a deep sense of regret that we are compelled to publicise a serious error in the presentation and interpretation of Buddhism to which our attention was drawn not long ago. It appears in the July 2003 issue of the Readers Digest [Vol. 81, No. 484] under the caption GOOD KARMA, prefaced with the words Love, Laughter. It is presented as a dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in the form of questions put to him by RD and answers given by His Holiness. In the middle of a long interview between the two parties, the purpose of which it is not for us here to guess, a disastrous presentation of Buddhism is put in the words of His Holiness. We have no desire whatsoever to be critical of what His Holiness says. Not only did I personally present myself when we felicitated His Holiness on his 60th birthday in New Delhi some years ago but I also have been keenly following His Holiness' writing before and after this event.

11. There are two objectionable portions in his comments. No.1 is that the speaker who answers a question put to him, refers to a story in Buddhism [or

a Buddhist story] without any comment about the genesis of this story, about the time of its origin or the tradition to which it belongs or even to the book from which the story is taken. It is too well known that the story comes from the *Upāya Kaushalya* [Skill in Strategies] *Sūtra* of the Mahāyānists. This little bit of useful information gives the RD interpretation a different slant. In talking about a religion which has had a period of growth and development of more than twentyfive centuries and therefore has within it three distinct traditions, including the subsequent ones of the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna, besides the one of earlier Indian origin, one is not justified in bundling them all in one and referring to it under the generic name of Buddhism.

12. Lamentably one here seriously lacks a sense of historical perspective. It would be tragic if one could in such a situation be accused even of intellectual dishonesty. Paying due respect to current trends of academic magnanimity and generosity, even for purposes of global unification, one cannot reasonably be made to forget or ignore the vital differences between the original and the later deflections which have crept into the core of Buddhism. They have at the same time their legitimate right to be so, owing to very significant regional and cultural differences in their origin.
13. Talking at a global level, fashioning as it were world opinion, willfully or otherwise, one also needs to reflect a degree of academic soundness in the process. Even within the pages of the RD, one does not want to take its contents as mere fiction. The objectionable portion No.2. is that the person who is esteemed here as the killer of one person to save 499 others, reflecting his wisdom and magnanimity, although is first referred to as the Buddha in one of his previous lives, is thereafter indiscreetly referred to as the Buddha. "So the Buddha took the sin by killing one person as well as saving 499 people - purely out of compassionate motivation." One could give on this a verdict of reckless misrepresentation. Even in the Mahāyāna stories such as the Vyāghrī Jātaka, the doer of such altruistic action in the BIG WAY is

always referred to as the Bodhisattva or Buddha aspirant and not the Buddha. Such persons always relate and belong to an earlier preparatory period on the way, prior to the attainment of Buddhahood. It is our candid opinion that these statements we refer to here could not possibly bring credit either to the questioner or to the one who answers them in the way he does in the RD.

14. What I have done so far, I believe, is to place before you a very limited number of samples both from ancient Buddhist historical material and modern-day speculative advances made in the field of Buddhist teachings. Using the criteria we are accustomed to utilise, we notice a great extent of deflection in these from what is believed to be the letter and the spirit of the original.

15. Our endeavour is to present to both the adherents of the ancient Theravada tradition and those who are critical students of that tradition who wish to see the differences between the old and the new, noting deflexions and the deviations. We do not wish to call upon them to accept or reject, assess or evaluate. Different approaches to this subject may serve different purposes. We leave it to our audience, with the multiple freedoms we enjoy today, to choose the cause they wish to serve.

May the message of the Dhamma prevail long in the world, bringing peace and happiness to mankind.

Ciraṃ tiṭṭhatu saddhammo loko hotu sukhī sadā.